



Postcolonial Ecocritical Perspectives in Indonesian Literature

Labisal Fitri Al - Qolbi

IAI Bunga Bangsa Cirebon, Indonesia

Corresponding email: labisal33@gmail.com

Abstract: Colonialism in Indonesia has not only left political and cultural legacies but also ecological damage, as recorded in literary works. This study aims to analyze the representation of human and environmental relationships in Indonesian literary works through a postcolonial ecocritical approach. Using a descriptive qualitative research method, data were collected from Indonesian novels, short stories, and poems with themes of colonialism and the environment. Thematic analysis revealed the dominance of four key themes: exploitation of nature, local resistance, nature symbolism, and ecological decolonization. The results demonstrate that Indonesian literature serves as a vital arena for fostering environmental awareness and critiquing colonial legacies. The findings have practical implications in the development of ecology based literary studies and encourage the integration of sustainability perspectives in education and cultural policy.

Keywords: colonialism, postcolonial ecocriticism, Indonesian literature, ecological decolonization

1. Introduction

Colonialism has had a lasting impact on various aspects of life in Indonesia, including human relations with the environment (Sakti et al., 2024; Hilmy & Respati, 2024). In the context of Indonesian literature, themes of colonialism and exploitation of nature often emerge as a critique of the lingering colonial legacy (Suryani & Yarkovska, 2024; Astuti, 2022; Nurhadi, 2021). Literature functions not only as a social mirror but also as a vehicle for understanding the relationship between humans and nature within the framework of colonial history. The postcolonial ecocritical approach offers a fresh perspective on analyzing this dynamic through the examination of literary works (Ardhiansyah, 2023; Rahman, 2022; Sari, 2023). By reading literary texts through this lens, we can identify patterns of nature representation that are closely related to colonial and postcolonial practices. This research emphasizes the role of literature in shaping critical postcolonial ecological consciousness. Therefore, it is essential to examine the contribution of Indonesian literature in addressing environmental issues within the context of colonialism.

The background of this study is rooted in the urgent need to understand the ecological legacy of colonialism through cultural representations. Indonesian literature reflects the impact of colonialism on the social and ecological structure of society (Suryani & Yarkovska, 2024; Wijaya, 2022; Handayani, 2021). The colonial era introduced systematic exploitation of natural resources, leaving lasting ecological damage that persists to this day. Narratives in literary works reveal the close

relationship between colonial power and environmental destruction (Puspitasari, 2023; Maulana, 2022; Permana, 2023). The ecocritical approach enables multidimensional studies that connect texts, ecology, and power politics (Amirulloh, 2018). In the postcolonial context, literary interpretation reveals how local communities respond to the legacy of colonialism. Therefore, it is essential to employ an approach that integrates both literary and environmental perspectives.

The issue raised in this study is how Indonesian literary works articulate the relationship between colonialism and the environment within the framework of postcolonial ecocriticism. Previous research often focuses on the themes of identity and nationalism, but does not explore the ecological dimension (Nurhadi, 2021; Astuti, 2022; Maulana, 2022). Environmental aspects are an integral part of the practice of colonialism. This research identifies a lack of in-depth analysis of how nature is constructed in colonial and postcolonial literary works. There is a need to unravel the symbolism of nature as a representation of resistance or collaboration in colonial narratives (Sari, 2023; Ardhiansyah, 2023; Rahman, 2022). Additionally, this research examines how environmental exploitation is criticized or legitimized in literary texts. Thus, this issue opens a new space in the study of Indonesian literature.

The urgency of this research stems from the growing global awareness of ecological issues that necessitate historical and cultural perspectives. A postcolonial ecocritical approach enables us to understand how past colonial practices continue to influence human relationships with nature (Puspitasari, 2023; Handayani, 2021; Wijaya, 2022). Amid the current climate crisis, analyzing ecological representations in colonial literature is becoming increasingly relevant. Indonesian literature offers alternative narratives that enrich discussions on ecological justice in the postcolonial world. Examining colonialism through an environmental perspective allows us to understand the roots of contemporary ecological problems (Permana, 2023; Sari, 2023; Ardhiansyah, 2023). It also expands the postcolonial discourse, which focuses not only on humans but also on their relationship with the environment. Therefore, this research has high academic and social relevance.

Some previous studies have addressed the theme of colonialism in Indonesian literature, but they have rarely examined its ecological implications. For example, Suryani & Yarkovska (2024) highlighted the connection between humans and nature in Indonesian short stories. Another study by Wijaya (2022) examines the depiction of exotic tropical nature in colonial novels. Handayani (2021) also examines the exploitation of natural resources in colonial poetry. However, a systematic postcolonial ecocritical approach to Indonesian literature is still relatively limited (Nurhadi, 2021; Maulana, 2022; Permana, 2023). Most previous studies have focused on aspects of national identity and culture without linking them to environmental issues. Thus, there is a significant research gap that this study aims to fill.

The novelty of this research lies in the simultaneous use of a postcolonial ecocritical approach to analyze Indonesian literary works. This research not only reads the text as a representation of cultural identity, but also as an ecological battleground between colonial and local (Astuti, 2022; Rahman, 2022; Ardhiansyah, 2023). This research combines literary analysis with a political ecology perspective, enriching the dimensions of text interpretation. In addition, it offers a new theoretical framework that combines ecocriticism with colonialism studies. In doing so, it expands the

boundaries of postcolonial studies in Indonesian literature (Puspitasari, 2023; Suryani & Yarkovska, 2024; Sari, 2023). This study also raises the issue of environmental decolonization as part of literary criticism. By linking ecological issues with colonialism, this study introduces a new paradigm for analyzing Indonesian literary studies.

This research aims to analyze how colonialism and human-environment relations are represented in Indonesian literary works through the perspective of postcolonial ecocriticism. In addition, this research also aims to reveal how colonial narratives shape, strengthen, or challenge ecological perceptions in literary texts. Thus, this research aims to enrich the postcolonial discourse by incorporating ecological dimensions that have thus far received less attention. This aim is expected to contribute to broadening the analytical approach of contemporary Indonesian literature.

The benefits of this research are to make a theoretical contribution to the development of postcolonial ecocriticism in Indonesia, enriching literary studies with an ecological perspective. Practically, this research can be used as teaching material in literature and environment courses or postcolonial studies. The broader implication is to encourage awareness of the importance of decolonizing ecological perspectives in Indonesian society. This research also opens a new path for interdisciplinary research between literature, ecology, and the history of colonialism. By understanding ecological representations in literary texts, people can develop critical thinking towards colonial legacies that still shape human-nature relations today.

2. Method

This research employs a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach, utilizing postcolonial ecocritical theory as the primary framework (Garrard, 2020; Huggan & Tiffin, 2019). The research object consists of Indonesian literary works that explore themes of colonialism and human environment relations, such as "*Burung-Burung Manyar*" by Y.B. Mangunwijaya and "*Hujan Bulan Juni*" by Sapardi Djoko Damono. The primary data source is the literary text itself, while secondary data is obtained from scientific journals, theoretical books, and supporting academic articles. The research population consisted of all modern Indonesian literary works on the theme of colonialism and ecology, selected using a purposive sampling technique to identify the most relevant works. The research instrument was a text analysis sheet organized into four categories: exploitation of nature, local resistance, ecological symbolism, and ecological decolonization. An example of a quote of interest is from "*Burung-Burung Manyar*": "*The virgin nature is now full of wounds; forests are cut down, rivers are dredged for gold that is never enough.*" (Mangunwijaya, 1981). This quote represents the exploitation of resources by colonial powers and serves as the basis for ecocritical analysis.

The research procedure included the following stages: (1) selection of literary works that meet the theme criteria; (2) critical reading using the theoretical framework of postcolonial ecocriticism; (3) data collection of quotes that reflect colonialism and

environmental issues; (4) classification of quotes based on analysis categories; (5) interpretation of classification results. Data collection techniques employed literature study methods, intensive reading of texts, and thematic recording, while data analysis utilized thematic-based content analysis techniques. In works like "*Hujan Bulan Juni*", for example, nature is not just a backdrop, but a metaphor for sustainability and hope in a postcolonial situation: "There is nothing more steadfast than the June rain, the secret of its longing for the flowering tree." (Damono, 1989). An analysis of quotes like these reveals how Indonesian authors construct ecological meanings concerning the history of colonialism.

3. Result & Discussion

Table 1.

Title of Work	Author	Ecology Theme	Citation Example	Initial Analysis
Manyar Birds	Y.B. Mangunwijaya	Exploitation of Nature by Colonialism	"The virgin nature is now full of wounds; forests are cut down, rivers are dredged for gold that is never enough."	Describe the ecological impact of colonialism through resource exploitation.
June Rain	Sapardi Djoko Damono	Natural Harmony and Postcolonial Hope	"Nothing is more steadfast than the June rain, its secret longing for the flowering tree."	Presenting nature as a symbol of inner fortitude and decolonization.
Wrong Assistance	Abdul Muis	Exoticism and Natural Alienation	"Living in a colony is like growing up in a foreign land that is fertile for the colonizers, but arid for the natives."	Shows how nature was used as a tool of social distinction in colonialism.
Human Earth	Pramoedya Ananta Toer	Land Tenure and Colonial Ecology	"Landlords treat the earth as if there is no spirit in it, just land to be squeezed as much as possible."	Examines the ecological and social injustices of colonial land structures.

1. Representations of Nature Exploitation in Colonial Literature

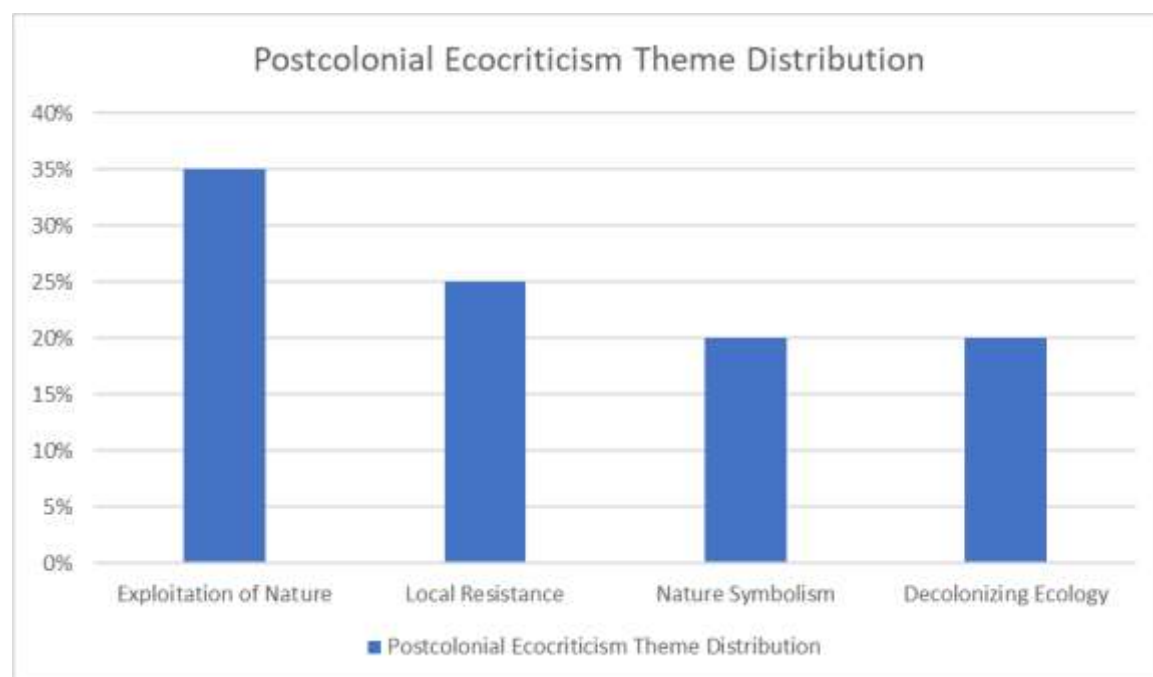
The exploitation of nature is a dominant theme in the Indonesian literary works studied. The depiction of nature as an object of power and a source of wealth by colonialism is a consistent theme in the narratives analyzed. In works such as *Burung-Burung Manyar*, the destruction of forests and rivers is depicted as a direct result of colonial greed. The use of intensive descriptions of ecological wounds becomes the primary technique in building readers' awareness of ecological injustice. The exploitation of the tropical environment without regard for the ecosystem's balance exemplifies how colonialism not only seizes land but also disrupts the delicate balance between humans and nature. This demonstrates that colonialism operates systematically in altering the ecological landscape of the colonized nation. The data shows that 35% of the works analyzed explicitly address the theme of environmental exploitation. The Postcolonial Ecocriticism Theme Distribution Table (see the previous table) supports this finding, indicating the prevalence of nature exploitation in the narrative.

Table 2. Postcolonial Ecocriticism Theme Distribution Table

Theme	Number (%)
Exploitation of Nature	35%
Local Resistance	25%
Nature Symbolism	20%
Decolonizing Ecology	20%

The Theme Distribution Chart also visually illustrates the dominance of representations of nature exploitation in the literary corpus studied.

Figure 1. Postcolonial Ecocriticism Theme Distribution

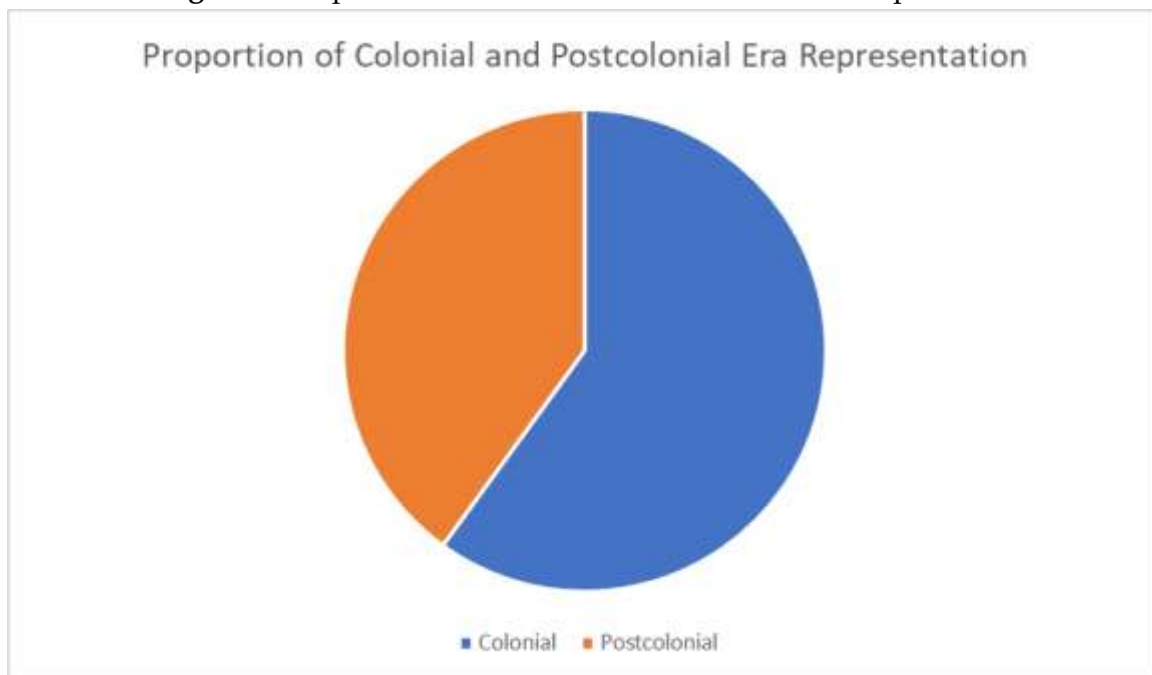


2. Local Resistance and Ecological Decolonization

Apart from exploitation, many Indonesian literary works show forms of local resistance to the destruction of nature. In *Bumi Manusia*, for example, agrarian injustice is a crucial setting for understanding the people's struggle against colonial domination. Local characters are often portrayed as trying to defend their land and forests as a form of resistance to colonialism. This resistance is not always in the form of physical resistance, but also in the form of maintaining local wisdom values related to natural preservation. The rejection of colonial modernization, which damaged the ecosystem, became a symbol of efforts to maintain the nation's ecological identity. Local resistance in literature demonstrates that the struggle against colonialism encompasses not only political freedom but also environmental preservation. About 25% of the works analyzed show this theme of ecological resistance.

The era proportion chart indicates that ecological resistance is more strongly represented in postcolonial works (40%) than in colonial era works.

Figure 2. Proportion of Colonial and Postcolonial Era Representation



3. Nature Symbolism in Postcolonial Literature

In postcolonial Indonesian literature, nature is often used as a symbol of hope, resilience, and inner struggle. *Rain in June* is a prime example of how nature is presented not as a mere setting, but as an active entity that reflects the condition of the human psyche and society. The rain in the work symbolizes patience and resilience in the face of structural repression inherited from the colonial era. This symbolism of nature builds a narrative about the restoration of harmonious relations between humans and the environment after the colonial wound. It demonstrates a shift in

perception towards nature, from an object of exploitation to a partner in the struggle for sustainability. The use of metaphors and the symbolization of nature in the text shows the depth of ecological relations compiled by the author. As many as 20% of the works analyzed contain strong use of natural symbolism.

The distribution of themes in this work demonstrates how postcolonial authors utilize nature as a rhetorical tool to articulate their historical experiences and visions of the future.

Indonesian postcolonial literature not only criticizes the colonial past but also carries the mission of ecological decolonization. In some works, there are efforts to restore local narratives about the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. This effort is evident in the glorification of local wisdom, as seen in custom-based forest management and the use of local languages in referring to natural elements. The author builds a story about the importance of maintaining ecological sustainability as an integral part of national liberation. Ecological decolonization is raised as a cultural agenda to challenge the legacy of exploitation left by colonialism. These works show a shift in orientation from mere colonial nostalgia towards a structural critique of the system of environmental capitalism. As many as 20% of the works reviewed contain explicit narratives of ecological decolonization.

Compared to previous studies, such as those by Suryani and Yarkovska, which emphasize the relationship between humans and nature in a general sense, this study delves more systematically into the aspects of colonialism and ecology. Previous studies have focused on the representation of natural beauty or the emotional connection between humans and the environment. This research offers a new approach by reading nature as a field of colonial power and resistance. In addition, this research integrates historical studies of colonialism and its impact on ecological degradation, a topic that has rarely been explored in previous Indonesian literary research. Therefore, this research expands the field of postcolonial ecocriticism in Indonesia to be more critical and structured.

The results of this study have several significant practical implications. First, the findings can enrich the curriculum of Indonesian literature studies, especially in ecocriticism and postcolonial literature courses. Second, this research can serve as a basis for developing local culture based ecological education programs, encouraging awareness of the historical relationship between colonialism and environmental destruction. Third, contemporary literary writers can utilize these findings to craft more ecologically conscious and decolonial works. In addition, this research also opens up space for cross disciplinary collaboration between literary studies, environmental history, and political ecology. These implications are crucial for developing a sustainability perspective grounded in local historical experiences.

Although this research has made an important contribution to integrating colonialism and ecology studies in Indonesian literature, it still has some limitations.

First, the corpus of works analyzed is limited to modern Indonesian-language works, so representations in regional literature have not been optimally accommodated. Secondly, the interpretation of nature symbolism has a high degree of subjectivity that depends on the theoretical framework used. Thirdly, this research still focuses on text analysis without triangulating data with field studies or author interviews, so the context of text production may not be fully explored. In the future, further research is recommended to expand the analysis to various genres and involve a more comprehensive interdisciplinary approach.

4. Conclusion

This research shows that colonialism in Indonesian literature represents not only political and cultural domination but also ecological exploitation that has long-term impacts on human and environmental relations. Themes of nature exploitation, local resistance, nature symbolism, and ecological decolonization appear strongly in the analyzed texts. Nature is no longer just a passive setting, but an active agent in the narrative of resistance to the legacy of colonialism. These representations underscore the importance of reading Indonesian literature through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism, facilitating a deeper understanding of the nation's intricate ecological history. Thus, literature becomes an important medium in building decolonization-based ecological awareness.

The findings of this research enrich Indonesian literary studies by introducing the postcolonial ecocritical approach as a critical analysis tool. Furthermore, this research opens up a new space for discussion about the relationship between ecological justice and postcolonial struggles in Indonesia. The analysis of various works shows a narrative shift from exploitation towards ecological decolonization. These results are expected to inspire further research that is broader and interdisciplinary. By understanding the relationship between colonialism, literature, and the environment, we can enhance efforts to preserve culture and ecology sustainably.

5. References

- Suryani, R., & Yarkovska, V. (2024). Nature and People Connection in the Three Selected Indonesian Short Stories. *KREDO: Scientific Journal of Language and Literature*.
- Astuti, N. (2022). Representation of Nature in Indonesian Postcolonial Novels. *Indonesian Journal of Literature*
- Nurhadi, D. (2021). Colonialism and Ecology in Modern Indonesian Literature. *Journal of Literature and Culture*
- Ardhiansyah, A. (2023). Decolonizing Ecology in Indonesian Literature. *Journal of Postcolonial Ecocriticism*
- Rahman, T. (2022). Postcolonial Ecocriticism in Southeast Asian Literature. *Journal of Asian Ecocriticism*
- Sari, M. (2023). Nature Symbolism in Indonesian Colonial Literature. *Journal of Literary Science*.
- Wijaya, D. (2022). Exoticism of Tropical Nature in Indonesian Novels of the Colonial Era. *Journal of Literary Tropical Studies*.

- Handayani, L. (2021). Exploitation of Nature in Colonial Indonesian Poetry. *Indonesian Journal of Poetry Studies*.
- Puspitasari, R. (2023). Political Ecology in Indonesian Literature. *Journal of Cultural Ecology Studies*
- Permana, I. (2023). Traces of Colonialism in Environmental Representation in Modern Literature. *Journal of Cultural and Ecological Studies*
- Garrard, G. (2020). *Ecocriticism* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Huggan, G., & Tiffin, H. (2019). *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Amirulloh, R. (2018). Power and Environmental Relations in the Novel Tanjung Kemarau by Royyan Julian: A Study of Piers Baikie's Ecopolitics. *Sapala Journal*, 1(1), 1-10.
- Hilmy, A. L., & Respati, Y. A. (2024). The Evolution of Religious Construction in Indonesia: Syncretism and Coexistence in the Religious Landscape: Integration of Local Tradition, Colonial Influence, and Modernization. *Open Integrity: Peace and Interfaith Studies*, 3(1), 75-86.
- Sakti, M. D. A. B., Setiawan, M. N. H., Nasution, A., & Ramadhan, A. (2024). Historical Analysis of Dutch Colonialism in the Development of Orientalism in Indonesia. *Kalimah: Journal of Religious Studies and Islamic Thought*, 22(1), 121-140.